

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

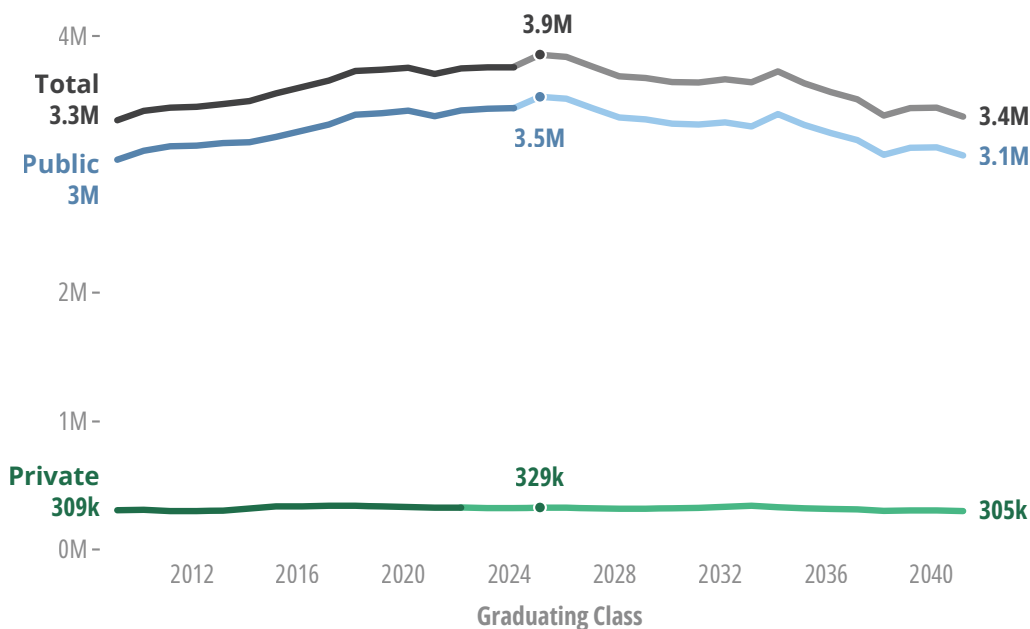
Likely the largest graduating class in U.S. history will earn high school diplomas in 2025 before the nation sees a steady decline for years to come. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has released the 11th edition of *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, with new data and projections through 2041. This report adds new urgency for postsecondary education leaders and policymakers to implement evidence-backed approaches to ensure the country has the needed workforce to drive tomorrow’s economy.

This resource, which includes an in-depth report and interactive data visualizations, has been a cornerstone of education policymaking since its first release in 1979. This latest edition identifies the following key findings:

The total number of high school graduates is expected to peak in 2025 and then decline steadily through 2041.

WICHE projects that the total number of high school graduates will peak in 2025 before entering a period of steady decline through 2041 attributable to fewer births 18 years prior. Ultimately, the nation is projected to see a 13% decline from the peak through the end of the projections.

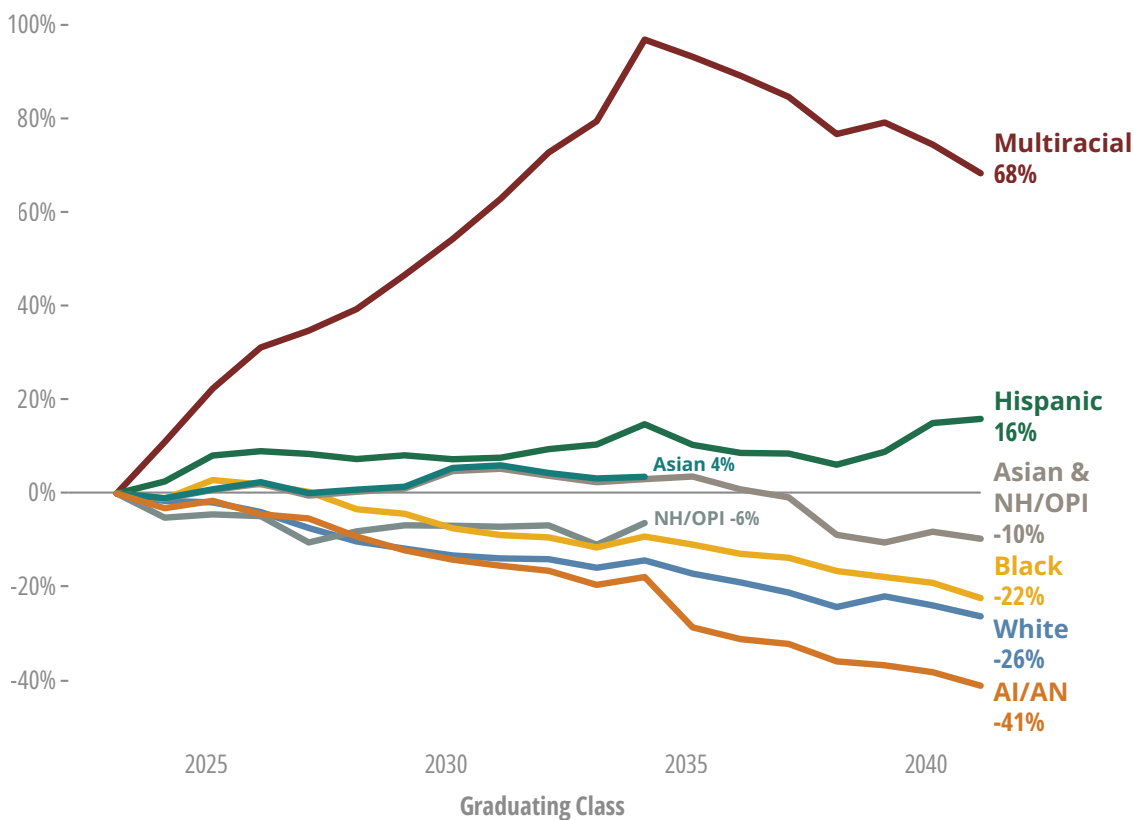
Figure 1. High school graduates, reported (2009 to 2023) and projected (2024 to 2041)



The proportion of future graduating classes who come from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds — particularly Hispanic and Multiracial graduates — will continue to increase.

Based on analysis of public school graduates, these trends have been evident since WICHE first disaggregated data by race and ethnicity in 1998. Hispanic graduates and those identifying as Two or More Races are expected to see the strongest growth, as the number of White graduates continues to decline in number and as a proportion of the total. While smaller racial and ethnic groups such as American Indian/Alaska Native graduates and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders are projected to decline, a large number of these graduates are actually included in the Two or More Races category.

Figure 2. Percent change in public high school graduate projections by race and ethnicity



Compared to 2023, 38 states are projected to see a decline in the number of graduates by 2041, as most regions in the U.S. continue to shrink.

The Midwest and Northeast have already experienced declines in the total number of graduates. The South will continue to defy broader national trends with growth followed by a slight decline at the end of the projections, while the West more closely mirrors national projections. Only 10 states are projected to grow from the national peak in the total number of high school graduates in 2025.

Beyond the cliff: Potential strategies and solutions for the challenges ahead.

The coming peak and subsequent decline — colloquially referred to as the “enrollment cliff” — has been predicted for years but, now that the moment is here, it can be jarring especially to those in education and workforce development. With postsecondary enrollments already declining, the looming drop in the number of potential college students adds to the existing challenges in meeting workforce needs for educated, skilled, and highly trained workers. Even with the anticipated declines in the total number of high school graduates, the good news is that there are still more than enough potential students to ensure that tomorrow’s economy has the necessary teachers, healthcare workers, engineers, and other skilled people needed to fuel our economy.

But meeting this challenge will require urgent action. Higher education can leverage successful evidence-based practices to increase college access and improve success for students once they enroll. Potential strategies and solutions include making college more affordable, enhancing advising and other student supports, developing stronger school-to-work and work-to-learning pipelines, simplifying college admissions and financial aid processes, addressing access and persistence gaps experienced by underrepresented students, and expanding opportunities and access for adult students.

